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SUBJECT: CIVIC ACTION MAY RE-ROUTE CONTROVERSIAL TRANS-SHIKAGOGH HIGHWAY PROJECT

1. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Treat Accordingly.

SUMMARY

2. (SBU) The Ministry of Transport and Communication announced plans earlier this spring to construct a highway that some NGOs claim would destroy one of the last remaining forest reserves in Armenia. An organized civic campaign against the plan has spurred rumors that the GOAM is possibly re-considering the controversial highway project. In response to early criticism, the GOAM cited "strategic" reasons for choosing the particular route, noting its proximity to Azerbaijan. Early reports indicated that GOAM officials at the highest levels were in support of the project.

NGOS RAISE ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

3. (SBU) The Ministry of Transport and Communication announced plans to construct a highway in the southern part of the country to circumvent the problematic, often impassable Karajan pass. NGOs decried the decision, saying the project would destroy one of the last remaining forest reserves, increase pollution, damage wildlife, and attract illegal logging. The World Wildlife Federation and United Nations site the Shikahogh Reserve, established in 1958, as home to many rare and endangered plant and animal species, including the country's only 5-7 rare Persian leopards. According to the NGOs, the Shikahogh Reserve is the only virgin oak forest area in Armenia.

CRITICS CITE POLITICAL PROBLEMS

4. (SBU) Jeffrey Tufenkian of the Armenian Forests NGO asserts that, in addition to environmental degradation, the highway project violates numerous national and international nature protection laws. They claim the project would also violate the Convention on Biodiversity (1992), the Convention on Combating Desertification (1994), and the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making, and Justice in Environmental Matter (1998). An unprecedented letter writing campaign organized May 20-25 by NGOs (and high-profile Diasporans) reportedly targeted President Robert Kocharian, Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan and Prosecutor General Aghvan Hovsepian.

MINISTER THREATENS TO RESIGN

5. (SBU) A loose coalition of NGOs approached international donors (including the USG) in protest over the project. The group has hosted a series of meetings in Yerevan and the outlying regions to attract attention to the issue. According to these NGOs, GOAM officials were using the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and citing "security considerations" as a way to scare officials in the Ministry of Nature Protection into lobbying to change the status of the reserve so that it could be more easily accessed for the highway project. In early June, Minister of Nature Protection Vardan Ayvazyan (a close ally of both the Prime Minister and Defense Minister) surprised observers during a meeting with environmental NGOs by suggesting he would resign unless the GOAM reversed its decision on the project. While there was little formal reaction from the GOAM to Ayvazyan's comments, the NGO community welcomed the move as a brave act of dissent.

CHANGING COURSE ON THE PROJECT?

15. (SBU) Recent press reports suggest that these NGOs' efforts may be having some effect as GOAM officials are now allegedly "studying" two alternate routes for the project. While the Transport and Communication Ministry has not confirmed they are looking at an alternate route, rumors in a local daily said June 15 that the government had given into internal and external pressure and had decided to change the route of the highway. Comments made by both the Minister of Transport and Minister of Nature Protection during a June 17 public forum appeared to confirm these rumors.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) When coupled with the efforts of student groups last year that ended in reforms to the GOAM's law on the draft, civic groups are beginning to gain influence on some policy issues in Armenia. While the environmental and economic aspects of the proposed project are important, we think the continuing trend towards responsiveness of the government to concerns raised by civil society is particularly noteworthy.
EVANS